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AUTHOR Williams-Carter, Debra
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ABSTRACT

Today's U.S. communities include European Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans among their many diverse cultural groups. America is composed of many different people from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. Regardless of cultural differences, many of these people make valuable contributions to U.S. society and will continue to do so in the future. Advocates of multiculturalism are concerned with how teachers are providing instruction for the diverse groups of children in their classrooms. Teachers are being held accountable for meeting the needs of all children in their classrooms, regardless of cultural differences. Therefore, teachers need a curriculum that incorporates diversity and makes allowances for the diverse groups of students they teach. Failure to embrace multiculturalism allows members of society to continue to promote prejudice and racism. Opponents of multiculturalism disagree with the need for a change from the traditional curriculum to one that embraces diversity. Teachers are a key element in the process of incorporating multiculturalism into the curriculum, and they can enhance or inhibit the learning process. Multiculturalism should be embedded into the existing curriculum. Successful implementation of a multicultural curriculum will prepare today's students to become tomorrow's leaders. (Contains 16 references.) (SM)

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Debra Williams-Carter
Mississippi State University

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Abstract

As we look around our communities, we see European Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, to name a few culturally diverse groups. From observation, we can see that America is composed of many people, from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. Regardless of cultural differences, many of these people make valuable contributions to our society and will continue to do so in the future.

Advocates of multiculturalism are concerned with how teachers are providing instruction for the diverse groups of children in their classrooms. Teachers are being held accountable for meeting the needs of all children in their classrooms, regardless of cultural differences. Therefore, teachers need a curriculum that incorporates diversity and makes allowances for the diverse groups of students that they teach.

America is the home for people from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. As a result, our society has often been referred to as an Anglo Saxon melting pot (Ravitch, 1992). The "melting pot" idea stemmed from the belief that different groups of people would come to America, willingly accept, and quickly conform to the American way of life. More recently, American society has been referred to as "tossed salad" or as a "patchwork quilt " (Harris, 1995). Although the views, "tossed salad" and "patchwork quilt" seem to show more appreciation and respect for the diversity that exists within our nation, each diverse group does not receive adequate recognition in America.

When considering the culturally diverse groups in America, one must consider the impact that these groups have on American society. Our society is the home and workplace for African Americans, Asian Americans, European Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans. Due to the fact that all of these groups of people live, work, and interact with others in America, these people have the opportunity to greatly impact the American way of life. It is inevitable that citizens will have to coexist with others that are different from themselves for the duration of their lives. If this coexistence is peaceful and productive, then America will prosper as a nation, rather than diminish.

How can these culturally diverse groups interact productively if members of each group do not feel valued, respected, and appreciated? Harmonious interactions do not usually occur under such conditions. Conditions must change if groups are to coexist and interact with each other in a peaceful and productive manner. The first step in this process is to embrace multiculturalism.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary (1994), multiculturalism means of, relating to, or intended for several individual cultures. Although the definition is stated in a simple manner, multiculturalism is a very complex issue. To embrace multiculturalism, one must be able to appreciate, respect, and tolerate the values and lifestyles of other groups in society. If individuals could embrace multiculturalism as easily as it can be defined,

relations between the various ethnic groups would be much more harmonious. The effect of Americans embracing multiculturalism would enable us all to live in a much better world.

Failure to embrace multiculturalism allows members of society to continue to promote prejudices and racism. It also allows for dominance of one race over others. When prejudices and racism exist in America, everyone suffers, especially the children. Our children must be prepared to work with people that are culturally different from themselves. They will be required to work cooperatively in the future with others (Pang and Neito, 1992). To begin preparing our children for this task, teachers need a multicultural curriculum that they can implement in their classrooms.

A multicultural curriculum is a curriculum that is culturally diverse. It includes the cultures of various ethnic groups that reside in America. It supports the notion that the history of all groups should be taught in schools, rather than just the history of European Americans. In the past, the education of students has been centered around the white race and Western civilization (Banks, 1992). A multicultural curriculum is one that focuses on inclusion, not exclusion.

Proponents for multiculturalism support the notion that a multicultural curriculum is needed in American schools. Lee (1992) explained that by the 21st Century, the white race may no longer consist of the majority of Americans. More specifically, Bruder (1992) explained that the year 2000 will reveal that white Americans constitute 55.9% of the United States population, down from the 75.5% in the 1980's. By the year 2,000, children of color will comprise one-third of all students enrolled in public schools. By 2020, children of color will comprise 46% of children enrolled in public schools (Cushner, McClelland, and Safford, 1996). While the number of European Americans are decreasing, the numbers for other groups of Americans are increasing. Banks (1992) stressed the importance of including all cultures in today's society. He stated, "If we are to remain a free and pluralistic society, we can neither do away with the Western canon,

nor exclude the contributions of people of color." Vann and Kunjufu (1993) discussed the importance of having an Afrocentric, multicultural curriculum. "Because students internalize what they are taught, schools have a profound effect on the confidence and self esteem of children. Considering the above-mentioned information, one could conclude that proponents have a very good rationale for the need for a multicultural curriculum.

Opponents of multiculturalism would disagree with the need for a curriculum change from the traditional curriculum. Concerning demographic information, Dunford (1992) stated , "No one ever thought or claimed that the traditional curriculum, with its emphasis on European cultural achievements, was justified on the grounds that most Americans are of European descent...) He further explained that "... the demographic proponents picture current immigrants as intractable agents of alien cultures that will forever transform the culture of the United States." Based on these two quotes, one could conclude that Dunford did not feel that the changing demographics are enough motivation to embrace multiculturalism and implement multicultural curriculums in American schools. However, regardless of the demographics, the students in American schools are from diverse backgrounds. Their cultures and the contributions made to America by their ancestors are important and deserve to be recognized and consistently taught to all students. Concerning the curriculum, Janko (1995) discussed his childhood memories of what he was taught while in school in 1945. In the article, "Memories of a Politically Incorrect Childhood," Janko stated the following: "As far as I can remember, there was never any lack of cultural diversity in what the schools offered me." From this statement, one could conclude that he was very fortunate. Because of his experiences, he does not see the need for a multicultural curriculum. However, most people of color have not been as fortunate. They would not be able to make the same statement or any statement even remotely similar. The majority of society has not been taught about diversity.

If students are to be prepared for life in the 21st Century, teachers must realize that they are a key element in the process of incorporating multiculturalism into the

curriculum (Tiedt, 1992). Teachers have the ability to either enhance or inhibit the learning process. By excluding the cultures of some students, teachers can limit the amount of knowledge that students acquire about other cultures, inhibit students' academic success, and damage students' self esteem by making them feel inferior to other groups in society. However, when the cultures of all students are explored and discussed in the classroom, learning is enhanced. Yatvin (1993) discussed how when students reveal a positive attitude toward school and learning, their academic achievement in school increases.

Sanchez (1996) cited the following goals and objectives from (Hernandez, 1989; Kosmoski, 1989) that are frequently found in multicultural curriculums:

> To help students recognize and understand the values and experiences of one's own ethnic/cultural heritage, To promote sensitivity to diverse ethnicities/cultures through exposure to other cultural perspectives. To develop an awareness and respect for the similarities and differences among diverse groups, and To identify, challenge, and dispel ethnic/ cultural stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination in behavior, textbooks, and other instructional materials.

He explains that these goals are only guidelines. Teachers must have the flexibility to determine how to most effectively incorporate information into the specific subject areas that they teach.

Successful implementation of a multicultural curriculum will prepare our students today to become the leaders that we will need in the future. Parks (1999) suggests that the following components might be beneficial if included in a multicultural curriculum: character education, moral education, peace education, peer mediation and conflict resolution strategies, emotional intelligence instruction, service learning, antiviolence education, critical thinking instruction, and global education. These components should help teachers adequately address issues concerning diversity and successfully implement a multicultural curriculum. Also, teachers should remember to

avoid teaching diversity in fragments or isolated instances. Appropriate implementation of multicultural curriculum requires consistently teaching about diversity.

Sanchez (1996) offered some practical considerations for teachers to assist them with making curricular changes. He explained that multiculturalism should be embedded into the existing curriculum. Teachers should not teach about groups in fragmented segments or isolated incidences. For example, many teachers only teach about the contributions of African Americans in February. Therefore, students are being taught about African Americans in a fragmented manner. During the month of February, teachers usually display pictures of famous African Americans. When the next month begins, the pictures are no longer displayed until the next year. Sanchez also suggested that teachers develop a creed for the course that they teach. The creed should summarize their commitment to promote and teach respect for diversity. He also suggested the need for specific components to promote the successful implementation of a multicultural curriculum. First, the teacher must analyze his or her attitude, make any necessary changes, and show sensitivity and respect for diversity. Second, the teacher must be careful to avoid totally relying on textbooks to teach material. Third, he or she must become a critical examiner of textbooks that are used to insure that bias does not exist. Finally, the teacher should have some goals and objectives to measure learning outcomes.

Implementing a multicultural curriculum may not be an easy task. Teachers may need some assistance with the development and implementation of a multicultural curriculum. Workshops on diversity can offer opportunities for teachers to learn how to implement multicultural perspectives into the curriculum and their classrooms (Solomon, 1996).

Some teachers and schools have already started the process of implementing multicultural curriculums (Moyers, 1993; Harris, 1995; & Olmedo, 1997). However, these teachers are in the minority. When considering the needs of students, these teachers and schools should not be in the minority. When these same students become adults, they will

be forced to coexist and interact with others. If students are not adequately prepared, our nation will suffer. To adequately prepare our students for their futures, we definitely do need a multicultural curriculum to utilize in classrooms. Therefore, teachers must work to develop a curriculum that will allow them to effectively teach about all cultures represented in the United States. If we are going to prepare our students, we must begin now!

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